

A survey was recently conducted in which it was determined that the average church had 7% tares among its congregation. We typically have about 30 folks on a given Sunday, so 7% of 30 is just over 2. So everyone, go ahead and look around and figure out who are the two people here today that are tares.

Yes, of course I am kidding here. I don't really want you to do this. I do have to point out, however, that some of you were pretty excited to be given the green light to pass some judgment. I saw that gleam in your eye ... can't hide from Fr. Kent!

Of course, you all know that we are not to pass judgment on others, and this is reinforced for us in today's Gospel reading, a parable of the kingdom from the 13th Chapter of St. Matthew. An enemy has sown tares, weeds, in the field of the householder and has thus corrupted the harvest. Not everyone who says, "Lord, Lord," will be saved. Not everyone in the church will persevere in faith to the end. But the angels, the servants of God, have been instructed to not pull the tares out of the field until the harvest, until the final day. The danger in weeding the field prematurely is that some of the wheat would also be uprooted with the tares. All will be sorted out at the end, but both the weeds and the tares must grow together during this age.

No doubt the angels have more perfect knowledge of the condition of the human heart than we do. We even have imperfect knowledge of our own hearts, let alone those of our neighbors. And we cannot see how any heart will grow and develop in time. So we must refrain from condemning others even if they appear to us to be doing foolish and, what might appear to us, obviously bad things. We must intentionally view all people with the generosity of Christ. We must choose to interpret their actions with charity, not with criticism.

Sometimes, those who we think are apostate, those for whom we have no expectation of conversion to Christ, are actually on their way to receiving the gift of Christ's atonement and in process of becoming more godly. To drive them away from the church would be to pull up the wheat when we think we are removing tares. We must not judge, lest we be judged. We must always view others with the eyes of Christ who desires that no man should perish, but that all should be saved. We must interpret others with generosity.

At the same time, we must not welcome wolves in among the sheep. Historically the biggest threats to the church, the greatest heresies that have led people away to perdition, have arisen from within the church. So we cannot be naive either. So how do we walk this narrow path between being judgmental on one side and being gullible on the other? The answer is that we must be catechized into the knowledge of God. We must study to know God as revealed to us by His Word, both Incarnate and written, and as interpreted to us by the generations of godly leaders of the apostolic church. If we are not firm in our knowledge of Jesus, if we are not sure of our convictions about God, then we will easily be led astray.

When this happens, we should raise the flag to our priest, and if our priest fails us, we signal the bishop, and if our bishop fails us, which I am sad to say unfortunately happens, we must sometimes walk away to find more faithful fellowship. We are blessed to have historic systems of accountability within the episcopal polity of our church. However, these systems will fail us more often than we care to admit, because the Church is made up of sinners, fallible men who sometime don't know their heads from their tails. So we must not be complacent in our study of the scripture, and we should likewise be proactive in our study of the Church. No system comprised of fallible men exists which can remove the responsibility of knowledge of God's word from us.

So there is a place for each of you to hold me, and all other clergy, accountable. This means

that you are welcome to ask for clarification from me about things that I say. Sometimes I might make a poor word choice that communicates the exact opposite of what I intend to communicate so it is important that you all ask me questions. And sometimes I will push back by telling you that this is what the catholic Church has always believed which is confirmed by God's word and therefore, this is what I preach. In such cases the appropriate response is to submit to the teaching of the Church.

Let us be clear, however, that holding clergy accountable is not the same thing as judging your fellow parishioners or brothers and sisters in Christ from other Christian traditions. If God instructs the angels to judge not, to let the tares grow with the wheat, then we have no basis for presuming that we somehow are better at passing such judgment.

In both this parable and in the collect, the Kingdom of God is referred to as an "household". This ideally suggests that there is a variety of individuals with various skills and talents, and challenging personalities no doubt, that are living together with some measure of harmony and mutual dependence. A household is something of an organism so we are reminded again of the metaphor of the Body which is also biblically used to describe the Church. This is the term used by the epistle lesson this morning, "And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to the which also ye are called in one body." As you recall, the focus upon the Church as the Body of Christ is one of the themes of Epiphany, for a well-ordered parish, as the local representative of the whole of the church, shows forth the glory of God to the world. The healthy parish is a manifestation of Christ to the world.

So the question becomes, how do we become, or maintain as the case may be, the health of our parish? The first answer we have found is to refrain from judging one another, and thus we extend the generosity of Christ to one another. Yet do not think that this means you can get away with sin. I will be happy to confront you if I learn that one of you is going off of the

rails! And I will withhold the sacrament if I become aware of persistent and unrepentant sin in the lives of those whose spiritual care is entrusted to me. After all, I am answerable to God.

Yet even in this, I must not judge too quickly, and such discipline is not enacted without counsel both with the individual and with the bishop. I must give you all space to walk your unique paths for God works in each of us uniquely. So a healthy parish is a spiritually generous parish, refraining from judging each other and extending grace to each other in our differences. This means that we trust in God, we have confidence in Jesus, to be working in each one of us. Therefore, we should be focused on our own obedience of Christ, and not upon the perceived lack of obedience of our fellow parishioners.

Still, let us not think that we are to simply pretend that problems don't exist. We are not just strangers who come together for a couple of hours on a Sunday and then ignore each other for the rest of the week. We are family. We live in community with each other and we will often bump each other, annoy each other. Sometimes, we do and say things with the best intentions, but our actions are actually destructive of relationships and damaging to our fellowship. We will have arguments with each other. Such is the way in a family, a healthy household.

So guess what? This is not a unique event in the lives of believers. Evidently the Church at Colossae some 2000 years ago, had the same issue which is why St. Paul instructs us that we should be forbearing and forgiving, and, "if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye." This is why we should sit up and take notice of the epistle lesson. We, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, are to take on to ourselves, "compassion, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, long-suffering." We must always actively seek to serve each other. This is the love that Christ shows for us, and this is the love we must show to each other.

Continuing, St. Paul says, “And above all these things put on charity, which is the bond of perfectness.” Put on charity. Put on that agape love which prioritizes others above the self. This is what we must do to live in peace with each other as one body, and I hope this is what we all want, for a loving parish is a healthy parish is a welcoming parish is a growing parish.

The apostle then goes on, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.” Ask yourselves right now, “What word describes the scene set for us by this reading?” The word that comes to my mind is beauty. For a group of people to be living in this kind of love, encouraging each other, sharing in each others failures, being patient with each other, working through disagreements in order to find resolution and restoration ... we would say that this is a beautiful parish. Isn't this what we want? Isn't this what the world wants? Isn't this truly an image of the love, and peace, and joy of Christ to the world?

Yes. Yes it is. Let us understand, however, that such a community doesn't happen by accident. First, it requires the Spirit of God to be present. Second, it requires each one of us to submit ourselves to these biblical admonishments. We, each one of us, must obey the call of Christ to lovingly speak into each other's lives, to actively listen to and serve each other, and to be so committed to each other that we are willing to do the work required to resolve misunderstandings and quarrels. This is what we should strive for as the Body of Christ. May we take these instructions to heart, and God grant that we here at Christ the King Anglican Church, would so embody the love of Christ for each other that everyone who comes through our doors would know that Christ is here.

And now, as the Body of Christ, let us prepare to receive the sacrament of unity which Christ

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Himself has given us. Let us receive His Body and His Blood, and may the grace given us in this sacrament strengthen us to more fully serve Him and to love each other as He loves us.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. AMEN.